

Did Women Have *an American Revolution?*

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Onderzoeksseminar III - 'Revolutions'

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5 January 2014

(8802 words)

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Introduction

‘Did Women have a Renaissance?’¹ Some time ago the title of this article by Joan Kelly struck me. After following a course on feminist historiography and history I was well aware that women had been largely left out of history until recently and that men had been the main agents, writers and interpreters of history. The question in this title struck me, because the very different position of women relative to men in history meant not only their subordinate or non-existent place in historic events and accounts thereof, but it could actually mean that women had not experienced the same things men did. History as we know it could potentially be wholly different from a woman’s point of view. Classifications like ‘Middle Ages’, ‘Renaissance’, and ‘Enlightenment’ might become invalidated when women of all times would have the chance to rewrite history. Ever since I came across this question, I wanted to look deeper into this riddle of women’s experience of history.

Our current conception of history and historical events has formed itself through a process from the beginning of time, building on descriptions, insights and interpretations from previous generations. Opinions and lessons that are passed on provide each generation with a specific frame of thinking from the outset. An intellectual *tabula rasa* does not exist. Culture is a determinant of how history is perceived. In this long process of the shaping of history, women have been left out for so long that a total change of viewpoint in reconstructing the past is not feasible. This effort is even more restricted because of a very limited and fragmented availability of sources concerning women and their historical experiences, owing to the strong presence of men in both the shaping of history and the discourse on history. However, even though the larger picture may not be changed, the little bits and pieces that do exist can give an insight in women’s lives during – what present history teachings consider to be – major historical events and alter the dominant view. My goal in this paper is to look into a few of those tiny scraps and thus hopefully contribute to unveiling a piece of the bigger picture of women’s history.

The central subject matter in this quest into women’s historical experience concerns the American Revolution. Following Kelly’s example, the question of this paper is: Did women have an American Revolution?² The theoretical literature on revolutions is quite extensive. Influential theories include those of Theda Skocpol, Jack Goldstone and Charles Tilly among

¹ Joan Kelly-Gadol, ‘Did Women Have a Renaissance?’, in: Renate Bridenthal ed., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston 1987) 175-201.

² When I speak here of ‘women’, I refer to white, American women.

others.³ In relation to this research paper there is however a problem with these theories. They all focus on state breakdown or regime breakdown as the major indicator of revolution, thus they all centre around the political. Women – as inhabitants of states – of course experienced revolutionary times and they lived through the same events men did, but as is generally known, they were not allowed to participate in politics before the American Revolution, nor were they afterwards. These theories thus cannot contribute substantively to this investigation. Next to this, history as we know it is essentially constructed from a masculine point of view. The events we call revolutions are concepts that originate from that same viewpoint. It follows that historians trying to theorize on these revolutions, theorize within a paradigm of masculine history. To apply these theories to women's history would mean that women's history is again stamped by concepts and perceptions derived from masculine history.

A theory that starts from a different outlook at first sight, is presented by Eric Selbin. To him human ideas and actors are most important in the development of revolutions, not outward structures, although he does not disregard these or rule them out. According to Selbin cultural symbols and collective memory of a society are key in explaining revolutions. This theory seems to open some doors into looking at women's experience in society. After all, they participate in culture and collective memory. But again, this theory is mostly hung up on the political. Selbin refers to popular political culture and collective memory in relation to politics as the finding places of revolutionary roots.⁴ Again, politics is not really the area where unquestionable conclusions can be drawn concerning women's experience. In short, the existing theories on revolution are not suitable to be applied uncensored to women's historical experience.

Having revised the theories on revolutions, it is clear that it is complicated to provide an answer to the theoretical question: what is a revolution in women's history? It is necessary to construct a specialized set of premises for this paper. One thing all revolutions have in common – underpinned by all theory on revolutions – is a radical change on some level, be it in the formation of the state or in ideas on the societal level. This is in alignment with the general definition of revolution Charles Kroeber proposes after his assessing of the existing theories on revolution and the problems thereof. In short, he states that the criterion of what is revolutionary is radical change (as well as attitude that is directed towards gaining radical

³ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge 1979); Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford 1991); Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* (Oxford/Cambridge 1993).

⁴ Eric Selbin, 'Revolution in the Real World: Bringing Agency Back in', in: John Foran ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London/New York 1997) 123-133.

change).⁵ Valentine Moghadam also uses as a base in his research on gender and revolution that society after revolution ‘should look as different as possible, in all aspects (...) from the previous system.’⁶

The following investigation into women’s revolutionary experience around the American Revolution starts from these premises and will thus focus on detecting radical changes. The notion of ‘radical’ here means a complete change from the situation as it was before. However, to ascertain whether a change was radical, it is not enough to just state whether something did not exist before and does now. Something that is new, for example a law, does not necessarily mean a complete change for society. It is very well possible that this new change is build upon ideas already existing in society. Change thus always has to be seen in relation to the society in which it takes place. It is only radical if its implications were unthinkable beforehand and if they change the outlook of society from what it was before. Still, a radical change can just be a radical change in theory, whereas people in practice hardly notice something has changed. So in this case it also must mean a noticeable change for women in their lives.

Also, it must be a change that lasts beyond the events of the revolution. During war – which the American Revolution was as well – the situation of life changes greatly and because of the exceptional situation, exceptional things are possible, for example the crossing of gender borders. However, after the war this exceptionality disappears. Sometimes the change lasts but mostly it will be reversed. Therefore, changes because of a revolutionary war are not necessarily radical changes.

This paper will further be built upon four criteria, which Kelly used in her article for ‘gauging the relative contraction (or expansion) of the powers of Renaissance women and for determining the quality of their historical experience.’⁷ In essence these criteria concern firstly the societal regulation of gender roles, secondly women’s political and economical roles, thirdly women’s cultural roles and lastly ideology about women. Moghadam in his research uses ‘examples of social transformation of a revolutionary type – that is, sweeping changes at the economical, political, cultural, and ideological levels.’⁸ These approaches thus focus on four similar areas. For this paper however, I will not use the term ‘ideological’ for the fourth level, but I will focus on the mental level. This is because I will look into the ideas that shaped

⁵ Clifton B. Kroeber, ‘Theory and History of Revolution’, *Journal of World History* 7:1 (1996) 25, 36.

⁶ Valentine Moghadam, ‘Gender and Revolutionary Transformation: Iran 1979 and East Central Europe 1989’, *Gender and Society* 9:3 (1995) 331.

⁷ Kelly, ‘Did Women Have a Renaissance?’, 176.

⁸ Moghadam, ‘Gender and Revolutionary Transformation’, 330.

and constituted society in general, while ideology refers to a system of beliefs, ideals and goals of a certain group in society.

In line with these articles, the approach in the first chapter of this paper, to investigate whether American women experienced a revolution at the time of the American Revolution, will centre on the radical nature of changes in the four areas Kelly and Moghadam share: the political, economical, cultural, and the mental space. These four spaces taken together prohibit having a scope that is too narrow and could overlook revolutionary consequences for women. At the same time, the most important levels of experience are covered by these four areas. Other experiential terrains, such as the societal regulation of gender roles Kelly also assesses, will share constituents with these areas, so even though they are not specifically examined, they will be touched upon.

When looking at the subject of women and revolutions, there are historical studies that investigate the role of women and gender in revolutions, including the American Revolution.⁹ This paper will however focus on the opposite side, on the role of the revolution in and the impact of it on women's lives. The question of this paper contains two nuances. One is the question whether women had a revolution at the time of the American Revolution. The other nuance contains the question whether women had an *American Revolution*. The first side opens perspectives beyond the political level. This will be assessed in the first chapter. The other nuance is about ideas originating from the American Revolution and considers that these ideas might have had influence on the lives of women on a term beyond the years of the revolution. This will be looked into in the second chapter.

Chapter one will contain an exploration of the most manifest consequences of the American Revolution for American women at the time. By this, a general view of women's experience of this revolution can be established. Next to that, the revolutionary nature of these consequences in relation to women's position in society can be gauged. On this subject some research has already been done, most notably by Mary Beth Norton, Linda Kerber and Jan Lewis.¹⁰

The year 1980 was an important year in this field, because two of the most important publications on this subject emerged then. Both Norton and Kerber published their work in that year. Both women handled the subject of the impact of the American Revolution on

⁹ Moghadam, 'Gender and Revolutionary Transformation', 332.

¹⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston 1980); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill 1980); Jan Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom? Women in the Era of the American Revolution', in: Nancy A. Hewitt ed., *A Companion to American Women's History* (Padstow 2007) 83-99.

women's lives and also to some extent the role of women in this revolution. Norton investigated – guided by numerous published and unpublished sources – the daily experiences of women during the revolutionary period and the influence of the revolution on the outlook of their life and on society's expectations of women. She therefore also reflected on women's situation before the revolutionary war. The first part of her book dealt with the continuities in women's lives and the second part with the changes. She reached the conclusion that the American Revolution had 'an indelible effect upon American women'.¹¹ However, as she brought to the fore herself in the paragraph prior to this statement, war could do the same. She did not research the specific revolutionary nature of the changes and that is where this paper comes in.

Kerber also wrote on how the American Revolution affected women's lives. She introduced her book as a political history of American women of the revolutionary period, which in its outlook knows continuance until today. Kerber wanted to disclose sources from women and make their experience known. Even though she referred to it as a political history, for women back then their experiences were limited to their private domain, so the political in this sense did not encompass the public political culture, since women were excluded from that. In her book, Kerber looked into the role of women in the American Revolution, into how they viewed the revolutionary affairs and into the way the revolution influenced the thoughts and lives of women. Where Norton researched the period before and during the American Revolution, Kerber is more focused on the time during and shortly after the revolution. She already linked this revolution up to later important events in women's history. The same as Norton, Kerber did not investigate the revolutionary nature of the changes and impact of the revolution and that is what this paper hopes to contribute to.

Jan Lewis, lastly, wrote more recently on this subject, using a question that greatly resembles this paper's question, namely: A revolution for whom? Still, these questions differ. Her starting point is the American Revolution while this paper does not take this revolution as a given for women and does not limit itself to its time frame. Lewis, like Norton and Kerber, reflected on the impact of the revolution on the lives of women. She reaches a conclusion of ambivalence, where the American Revolution resulted in some positive changes for women, but also in some negative. She neither assessed the revolutionary nature of these changes.

Because of the breadth of the question and the absence of theories to focus on specific matters or elements, this paper will mostly be a preliminary research, looking at the most obvious patterns and at what already has been discovered in this field. For this purpose I can

¹¹ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, XV.

make use of the work of the three authors just discussed. They have looked extensively into women's primary sources and provided sufficient material. The difference will be that in this paper, this material will be looked at from a another angle. Next to this I will use some other secondary sources that help shed more light on women's experience and the revolutionary nature of changes. I will thus use mainly secondary sources in this first chapter to gather a general view of women's lives around the American Revolution and assemble and denominate the major changes women experienced – or not, but at a few points supported by primary sources.

Because of the – potentially widely – diverging historical experience of women as opposed to men, I do not want to limit the research of possible revolutionary consequences of the American Revolution for women to the period around the revolution itself. Revolutions can have much wider implications than that. For this reason the second chapter will investigate whether women possibly had a delayed American Revolution. Since it is too much to look into all of history after this revolution, I will limit the research to a particular year and event where a clear link with the American Revolution can be found: the First Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, on 19 and 20 July 1848. This convention was organized to discuss women's lack of political and economical rights. The organizers hoped it would spark of major change for women on these areas.

This convention and its potential revolutionary content and consequences will be researched mainly using the *History of Woman Suffrage* (Volume I).¹² Although this book was published for the first time in 1881, it will be treated as a primary source on the Seneca Falls Convention, since some of its editors were involved in it, or even organized it, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. What they discussed, pleaded for and set as goals, reveals what women did not have at the time. This will say something about the state of affairs as discussed in chapter one and will give an idea whether there were any major changes on those levels – the political, economical, cultural and mental – in the years between. The events surrounding the Seneca Falls Convention reveal something about whether it was revolutionary in nature and impact or not. Another important primary source – stemming from the Seneca Falls Convention – that will be handled in the second chapter, is the *Declaration of Sentiments*, written by Stanton.¹³

¹² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage ed., *History of Woman Suffrage. Volume I 1848-1861* [Second Edition] (Rochester/London/Paris 1889).

¹³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'Declaration of Sentiments' (Seneca Falls 1848).

Together, these chapters and sources will give sufficient clues as to whether women had an American Revolution or not, after which, in the conclusion, the answer to the question of this paper can be reached.

CHAPTER 1

WAS WOMEN'S REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE REVOLUTIONARY?

This chapter starts from the premises that in order to label a historical event or time a revolution for women, a lasting radical change in their lives must have occurred at the political, economical, cultural or mental level – and preferably at more than one or all of these – which gives them a radically different position in society.

The first two sections examine the economical and the political level. Kelly described these to be including for women of that time ‘the kind of work they performed as compared with men, and their access to property, political power, and the education or training necessary for work, property, and power’.¹⁴ I will examine these two categories separately.

1.1. The Political Level

This level is where the historiographical indicated radical changes of the American Revolution took place. It suits with the content of this revolution, which was most characteristically about independence, liberty, direct representation and equality.

As has already become clear: women were excluded from politics before the American Revolution and they were so after.¹⁵ Fathers and husbands functioned as their political representation, without them having a say in it.¹⁶ Women were thus dependent on men in this realm. Before the American Revolution, the political place of both women and men was as subject of the British empire. The question of citizenship did not yet exist.¹⁷ Neither man nor woman had real political representation in the English Parliament. Theoretically in this sense, they shared a degree of political equality. Of course, since they could not assert any influence on the imperial regime, this was quite a worthless position. When America gained independence, the white male gained political independence – provided he owned property – and citizenship, but woman did not.¹⁸ The former degree of political equality no longer existed then, so the dependant position of women became more pronounced.

As Joan Gundersen shows in her article, for women after the revolution dependence became synonymous with subjection, whereas before the revolution these two concepts were

¹⁴ Kelly, ‘Did Women Have a Renaissance?’, 176.

¹⁵ Lewis, ‘A Revolution for Whom?’, 87.

¹⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 35.

¹⁷ Joan R. Gundersen, ‘Independence, Citizenship, and the American Revolution’, *Signs* 13:1 (1987) 62.

¹⁸ In many states, women were considered citizens, but they did not have any political rights belonging to that citizenship. That is what I am referring to here.

not considered as the same.¹⁹ She demonstrates further that the perceived dependent position of women was exactly the reason brought up in barring them from having the right to vote. The primary condition to be allowed to vote, was to own property. This ruled out most of the women directly, since as daughters or wives any property ownership was automatically transferred to their father or husband. There was a small group of single women, however, that did own property. Taking the principle of property ownership as the stipulation for suffrage, these women should have been allowed to vote. They weren't however. In every state – except New Jersey for a while – the vote was limited to propertied men, because women were viewed as 'naturally dependant'.²⁰ Their place therefore was not to cast the vote, but to be represented.

Gundersen exhibits another example in which the politically subjugated position of women was clearly visible. In the revolutionary war, the line that separated loyalists from republicans sometimes ran right through families and couples. Husbands could have strong loyalist sympathies, while their wife wholeheartedly and actively supported the republican cause. This caused a dilemma for the municipalities who tried to drive off the loyalists by confiscating their property. Women with patriotic sympathies who were unfortunate enough to differ on this subject with their husband, were mostly the losing party in this dilemma. Properties were then confiscated because the court judged that 'a man's actions outweighed those of his wife'.²¹

New Jersey is one very interesting exception when it comes to women and voting. Here, single women were allowed to vote from 1776 to 1807, of course provided that they owned property. This exception, however, proves the general rule in the end. The arguments with which the voting of women was eventually banned in 1807, referred to the dependency of women, which would imply they were not fit to partake in political matters.²²

Judith Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis ascertain that this fascinating period of time in New Jersey has been viewed by most historians as an error, as something that was legally overlooked. However, they state in their article very decidedly that this was not the case. From their sources a clear image appears of a thorough consideration on the granting of suffrage to single women in the states constitution in 1776 and also of fervent lobbying for

¹⁹ Gundersen, 'Independence, Citizenship, and the American Revolution', 62.

²⁰ Ibidem, 64.

²¹ Ibidem, 69-70.

²² Ibidem, 65. See also: Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 152-153.

women's votes in a considerable amount of years after this.²³ A particular fascinating part of this analysis of Klinghoffer and Elkins appeared in one of the reasons that lead up to the dismissal of single women from the suffrage in 1807. It seems that 'women lost the vote because they tended to vote for the wrong party'.²⁴ This is an interesting statement. It first of all shows a certain expectation of women in placing their votes, which refers again to their subjugated position. Moreover, if it is true that women voted opposite of what was expected of them, this could signal that historical events could have taken different courses, had women had more power to exert. This last statement should be thoroughly researched however, because this conclusion might be too swift and overlooking other grounds. Nevertheless, it is an interesting clue.

Despite their perceived political dependency many women were very politically active during the revolutionary years.²⁵ They became interested in politics and were active in all sorts of clubs and collective home activities with a patriotic purpose, and they took the lead in boycotting and rioting loyalist merchants.²⁶ Several women pleaded for their admission to the political realm as a full citizen at the time the constitution was under construction. These pleas were however no public or organized discussion. It was chiefly in personal letters to family or close friend that sentiments on full citizenship and political access for women were ventured. Abigail Adams was one of such women who pleaded with her husband John Adams the case of women:

Remember the Ladies [in] the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make ... Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.²⁷

No such rebellion as Abigail refers to happened however. Most women conformed to their expected role in society and only ventured these thoughts in the private realm. The issue of female citizenship thus was raised in revolutionary America. It was however mostly brought

²³ Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkins, "The Petticoat Electors": Women's Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776-1807', *Journal of the Early Republic* 12:2 (1992) 163, 166-167.

²⁴ Klinghoffer, "The Petticoat Electors", 192.

²⁵ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 189.

²⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 38-44.

²⁷ Letter of Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776, in: John Adams et al., *Adams Family Correspondence. Volume I*, L.H. Butterfield et al. ed. (Cambridge 1963-1993) 369-370.

up in private circles and never became a public discussion. Therefore it had little potential of achieving change.²⁸

A final important remark must be made concerning the political level of women's historical life and experience. Linda Kerber has noted that 'restricting women's politicization was one of a series of conservative choices that Americans made in the postwar years as they avoided the full implications of their own revolutionary radicalism.'²⁹ The radical ideals of liberty and political self-representation expressed in the rhetoric of the American Revolution provided a threat to the status-quo. American men wanted to keep things as they were, they wanted to decide on the policy of their nation themselves, not the English Parliament or the king. In the same way, for example, they did not want black slaves to gain freedom and influence in state matters. This threatened the position and power of the white American male segment in the country. When women would be granted the suffrage based on the aforementioned ideals, than other subordinate groups in American society could appeal to those as well. The American political elite could not risk this. As Lewis ascertains: 'To make women full citizens of the new nation threatened anarchy, by removing the ideological justification for the subordination of any group.'³⁰

So after the revolution women could be said to be as dependent as before the revolution.³¹ In sum, American women of the revolutionary era had – not surprisingly – no revolution on the political level in the short run. They thus had no *American Revolution* – seen in light of its content of liberty, equality and direct representation – at the same time men did. Whether they had a revolution at the time of the American Revolution is still not ruled out with this conclusion. Also, it is still possible for women to have had the American Revolution later. The next sections of this chapter will look into the first of these questions.

1.2. The Economical Level

On the economical level, women were as much subordinate to men as on the political level. It was another realm in which they were perceived as the dependent ones. As mentioned before, women fell, both as daughters and as wives, under the care of their fathers and husbands, who were the breadwinners and could decide for and over them.³² Any property a woman might have owned in-between father and husband – in the case there was an in-

²⁸ Jan Lewis, 'Women and the American Revolution', *OAH Magazine of History* 8:4 (1994) 24.

²⁹ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 287.

³⁰ Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom?', 89.

³¹ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 139.

³² Lewis, 'Women and the American Revolution', 23.

between – was automatically assigned to her husband on the day of marriage.³³ A woman was expected to get married, because in marriage lay her goal in life. This was not career making, but childrearing, housekeeping, caretaking and above all honouring her husband. This idea is clearly visible in the remark Thomas Jefferson makes to his daughter upon her wedding: ‘The happiness of your life depends now on continuing to please a single person. To this all other objects must be secondary.’³⁴

The few careers open to women fell mostly in the zone of caretaking. Midwifery for example was a typical woman’s job, although typifying this as a career might be too bold, since it was an extension of their familial caretaking into a societal caretaking, which was viewed as their natural task. The only other moment when women were allowed a decent place in the working economy, was when they functioned as stand-in for their husband in case of his illness or death. All this is not to say that women did not contribute economically. Theirs was however more of a contribution to their household economy, for example by producing cloth, not only for their families, but also for the market outside to engage in trading. Tasks they performed at this level of economy, were viewed as particularly feminine traits, so this was again an extension of what was seen as the natural space of a woman. Women had no choice in this sense, whereas men had much more room for choice for their occupation.

During the revolutionary years many women did experience a broadening of their responsibilities and possibilities. With many men away at war, decisions and tasks now fell upon their wives.³⁵ However, this entering of a realm from which they were banned beforehand, was only temporarily. It was part of the war-effort of the entire country and as such, a time of different rules when the normal way of living got disrupted and ad-hoc measures needed to be taken. These measures were mostly temporary, since after the end of the war, society usually tried to return to the pre-war situation. When this was the case, it was not a revolution for women – although it could have had far reaching consequences and constituted changes in mentality – but a temporary adjustment of society to challenging times.

A positive change for women following the revolution, came in the area of education. At the outset of the revolutionary years half of the female population was illiterate, whereas of the male population only twenty percent was. Education for girls in that time was seen as

³³ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 9, 120.

³⁴ Letter of Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 4 April 1790, in: Thomas Jefferson et al., *The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson*, Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear ed. (Columbia 1966) 51.

³⁵ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 195, 216.

useless, since they would not need it for their duties of housekeeping and childrearing.³⁶ After the revolution, however, education became increasingly viewed as a useful and necessary element in girls' upbringing.³⁷ After all, they were the nurturers and educators of the next generation of Americans. This last thought was fed by patriotism inflamed by the revolution.³⁸ Lewis, however, points to another source for this development of women's increasing education possibilities, which is Enlightenment thought. This thought brought the idea that women were not less intelligible by nature, but because they were educated less.³⁹ The American Revolution is thus not wholly responsible for this educational development in women's lives and was most likely nothing more than an accelerant. The change, though, was positive for women.

However, in practice, their roles did not really change. They were not allowed into more professions because of their increased education. Moreover, the educational curriculum offered to girls was often censored and focused mainly on skills they could use as wives and mothers.⁴⁰ Perhaps their minds became more independent by increased knowledge, but their position was definitely not. Nevertheless, a large improvement for women was that their mental abilities were finally recognised.⁴¹

Lewis describes a trend in the late eighteenth century, in which women were drawn into participating in the economical market more and more, both as producers and consumers. According to her, this development was accelerated by the American Revolution, as women, for example, were stimulated to produce more cloth for the war-effort.⁴² As consumers they also exerted their influence for the purpose of the revolutionary cause by boycotting loyalist merchants – which led among other things to the famous Boston Tea Party in 1773. However, as Lewis herself states, this development of women increasingly partaking in the producer and consumer market, was not caused by the revolution, but already well underway. Despite the revolution's accelerating effect on it, women still did not have much economical freedom and were still dependent on father or husband after the revolution. The economical position of the many more widows in society – a consequence of the casualties of the revolutionary war –

³⁶ Lewis, 'Women and the American Revolution', 24.

³⁷ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 256; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 199.

³⁸ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 189, 206.

³⁹ Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom?', 85-86.

⁴⁰ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 266.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 280.

⁴² Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom?', 84.

confirms that on the level of women's economical independence little had changed. Most of these women were poor and needed help from family or the community for their livelihood.⁴³

A few legal alterations did change – or had the potential to change – women's venture point in the economical realm. Two important things could be mentioned here. First of all the opportunity to divorce was widened. Since the revolution, divorce came to be seen as a natural right.⁴⁴ This loosened the dependent bond of women in relation to men, since they were allowed to break free of their husband now, theoretically anyway. In practice however, women could hardly reap benefits from this new law. Maybe they could divorce their husband, but they could not provide themselves with income. Moreover, upon divorce their husband retained the custody of any children.⁴⁵ So in practice women were still the dependent and submissive ones. A second legal measure Lewis mentions, was the legal abolition of primogeniture as a consequence of the revolution. This meant that male and female children were equal in this. Again, this was more of a theoretical change and did not work out practical benefits for women.⁴⁶

In these two sections the word 'dependence' has featured so many times, that it becomes very clear that the War of Independence did not gain women that independence on either the political or economical level of their lives. It can be concluded then that on these levels they did not have a revolution at the time of the American Revolution.

1.3. The Cultural and Mental Level

. The cultural and the mental level overlap and interact in this context. For this reason they are taken together in one subchapter here. The cultural part refers to the way in which women can shape and influence the outlook of the society they live in, but at the same time, the constituents for this are provided by ideas and discourses in society, by the way the role of women in it is perceived.

Moghadam introduces two theoretical models of gendered revolution: the modernizing emancipation model and the patriarchal woman-in-the-family model. In the first model the emancipation of women is an important part of the ideals and goals of the revolution. This last model is however not applicable to revolutions before the twentieth century.⁴⁷ The American Revolution thus can be placed in the patriarchal model of revolution, or the women-in-the-

⁴³ Klinghoffer, "The Petticoat Electors", 73.

⁴⁴ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 159.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 183-184.

⁴⁶ Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom?', 91.

⁴⁷ Moghadam, 'Gender and Revolutionary Transformation', 335-336.

family-model. In this model, ideological patriarchal values are linked with patriotism. Moghadam states that in it 'the family is exalted and women's role within it made paramount'.⁴⁸ Although Moghadam claims the French Revolution to be the precursor of this model, this description also fits exactly the American Revolution.

All historians point to a major change in the perception of woman's nature and position in American society, following and originating in this revolution, as the most characteristic change of this era in connection with women. The key concept in this change was virtue. As Ruth Bloch remarks: 'Throughout the Revolutionary period, virtue was the most valued quality defining individual commitment to the American republican cause.'⁴⁹ This notion of virtue thus stood in close connection to the revolution, its ideals and the new republic that was formed. To make the republic work, it was thought, virtuous citizens were essential. The success of the republic depended on the highness of the moral ground and the constructive contributions of its residents; in short it depended on virtue.

Women gained a new position in this new republican ideology. They came to be seen as more virtuous than men.⁵⁰ From this outlook it was mainly their position as wife, mother and parent educator that was magnified and emphasized in relation to the new republic. The family was the central breeding place of virtue. Women as wives and mothers were expected to be the perfect examples of virtue, in order to better their husbands and raise their children to become worthy and virtuous citizens.⁵¹ On this depended the success and progress of the nation. A poem, published in *The Maryland Gazette* in 1781 and directed to the American ladies who had showed their patriotism, shows this new thought from its starting lines:

All hail! Superior sex, exalted fair,
Mirrors of virtue, heav'n's peculiar care!
Form'd to inspirit and enoble man,
The immortal finish of creation's plan⁵²

This new mentality about the role of women thus matches the patriarchal woman-in-the-family-model of Moghadam. Kerber calls it 'Republican Motherhood' in the specific

⁴⁸ Moghadam, 'Gender and Revolutionary Transformation', 336.

⁴⁹ Ruth Bloch, 'The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America', *Signs* 13:1 (1987) 41.

⁵⁰ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 228, 243; Lewis, 'A Revolution for Whom?', 90.

⁵¹ Lewis, 'Women and the American Revolution', 24; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 229, 283.

⁵² 'The Attempt is Praise', *The Maryland Gazette*, 5 January 1781.

American context. She states it is an image and societal expectation of women which exists until today.⁵³

Lucia McMahon describes how, in American eyes of that era, the success of the new republic was – in theory – seen as dependent on a harmonious society and it was women who were expected to provide the necessary calming and harmonizing influence to keep society stable.⁵⁴ McMahon links this new opinion on women to new positive views on female education. In this way, education and civilization became connected. As McMahon explains: ‘With their refined manners and cultivated minds, educated women would bring happiness and harmony to early national society.’⁵⁵

The ideological connection between women and societal harmony in the early republic had a side-effect for women. McMahon shows that this connection was used to oust women from any political participation, because it would ‘disrupt domestic and social harmony, causing discord in marriages and families.’⁵⁶ Besides this, Lewis sees a restriction in women’s lives because of the increased importance assigned to virtue in women and their perceived supremacy in this over men. It gave them a greater responsibility and made them more susceptible to judgment. Still, Lewis claims that ‘[t]he rehabilitation of femininity was so radical and so rapid that by the turn of the century, some held out the hope that virtuous womanhood would redeem the entire nation.’⁵⁷ Norton says ‘[t]he transformation was startling in its swiftness and intensity.’⁵⁸ These statements have a ring of revolutionary impact to them.

Both Norton and Bloch see this new idea of the role of women as a crossing of the boundary between the private and the public sphere. The private actions of women suddenly gained social and political importance, because their virtue was thought to uphold the entire nation. According to Norton, this connected them with the public sphere where they never had such a connection before.⁵⁹ Bloch states that the meaning of the concept of virtue now ascribed to women, came to be the new idea of public virtue. It overruled the previous concept of public virtue that was solely applicable to men, which was purely connected with perceived masculine characteristics, such as rationality, bravery, self-sacrifice, and military

⁵³ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 12.

⁵⁴ Lucia McMahon, “‘Of the Utmost Importance to Our Country’: Women, Education, and Society, 1780-1820”, *Journal of the Early Republic* 29:3 (2009) 499.

⁵⁵ McMahon, “‘Of the Utmost Importance’”, 495.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 501.

⁵⁷ Lewis, ‘Women and the American Revolution’, 25.

⁵⁸ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 243.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 243.

and civic activity.⁶⁰ This image of public virtue changed because of the American Revolution as women were put forward as the source and upholders of civic virtue.

Now, was this new ideological vision on women so very revolutionary and were the consequences for women's lives very revolutionary? Though a boundary between private and public was crossed and characteristics viewed as feminine gained national importance, it did not seem to have had much radical impact on women's lives. Although these new ideas did add a new dimension of responsibility and importance, they mostly reaffirmed the already existent perceived role of women as wife, mother and housekeeper and her realm of living as the private home.⁶¹ As Kerber expresses it: 'public virtue was channelled into domestic life'.⁶² A woman's private actions might be viewed as having an influence on the public sphere, but this influence was indirect. It was still her husband or son who were exclusively admitted to that sphere, even though she might have taught them civic virtue. As much as women remained dependent in the political and economical sphere, they were reinforced in the private, domestic domain (and with that kept out of the public domain). Even though they gained more prominence in their role of republican mother and wife, the importance of their role still consisted of motherhood and marriage, just as it did before. Again there is no real radical, revolutionary change for women to be found at the time of the American Revolution.

⁶⁰ Bloch, 'The Gendered Meanings of Virtue', 41-43, 46-47, 53.

⁶¹ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 250.

⁶² Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 287.

CHAPTER 2

A DELAYED AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

‘Idea streams – transmitted via people – are powerful and pervasive and travel across time and space.’⁶³ This quote by Selbin indicates the rationale behind this chapter. If women did not have an American Revolution at the time American men did, reasoning from the idea that it is possible for women’s history to be wholly different in events and dates, it is possible that they had it later. The key ideas and ideals of this revolution could have influenced women and travelled over time to next generations where they could have generated a revolutionary outburst.

It is of course impossible in this paper to look at the whole period after the American Revolution till our current time, to see whether women had a belated American Revolution. This chapter will therefore focus on a specific moment in time, where a strong link with the American Revolution is visible. This concerns the First Women’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York. This was a “Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman” as the announcement said.⁶⁴ Not only was there discussion, but the women who organized this convention had also prepared resolutions to sign, in order to claim the rights they felt entitled to. Very importantly too, at this gathering, Elizabeth Cady Stanton read out her *Declaration of Sentiments*. This declaration was drafted after the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776, using the same form and phrases.⁶⁵ Here is thus a direct link of a notable event in women’s history with the American Revolution.

For this reason I chose to limit my research of long term consequences of the American Revolution to this particular year and moment in time, because the ideals of the American Revolution emerged here very clearly. Moreover, in 1848 a new generation of women had formed since the American Revolution, which set them apart from the generation of women of the revolutionary years.

2.1. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848

The First Women’s Rights Convention was organised by four women: Lucretia Mott, Martha C. Wright, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Ann McClintock. In the years prior to this event, these women had already been active in pleading for women’s rights, their

⁶³ Selbin, ‘Revolution in the Real World’, 126.

⁶⁴ Quoted in: Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage I*, 67.

⁶⁵ Thomas Jefferson, ‘Declaration of Independence’ (Philadelphia 1776).

activism mostly originating in the abolition movement. For a while they had contemplated the idea of a convention for women. Once the – rather abrupt – decision fell, the Convention was organized within only three days. During these days the organizing ladies wrote resolutions and speeches and Stanton wrote the renowned *Declaration of Sentiments*.

In the *History of Woman Suffrage* the most important events and proceedings of the woman's suffrage movement are gathered, recorded and described. The circumstances surrounding the organization of the Seneca Falls Convention are mentioned quite detailed. As one of the authors of this publication as well as having been one of the organizers of the convention, Stanton gives firsthand information on this particular event.

The *Declaration of Sentiments* is an important and well-known source in American women's history. Strikingly, the choice of these women for the *Declaration of Independence* from 1776 as a guideline for a declaration of their own, was not their first choice, nor was it something that they had been long preparing. In this sense it shows that on the forehand, these women did not have the revolutionary *Declaration of Independence* in mind. This perhaps weakens the link between the Seneca Falls Conference and the American Revolution. On the other hand, they first rejected a number of other historical documents for their purpose of stating their goal and opinion, because they found them 'too tame and pacific for the inauguration of a rebellion such as the world had never before seen.'⁶⁶ This shows that they chose the revolutionary declaration of 1776 with a very clear purpose, even though they had not thought of it beforehand. It shows they had something revolutionary in mind: a rebellion of women in order for them to gain freedom. It shows that they wanted to accomplish a major change in society, a revolutionary change.

The declaration and resolutions that were presented, debated, resolved and signed by many of those attending the conference – women as well as men! – during these days, contained radical demands for women. The demands were summarized as follows in *History of Woman Suffrage*: 'equal rights in the universities, in the trades and professions; the right to vote; to share in all political offices, honors and emoluments; to complete equality in marriage, to personal freedom, property, wages, children; to make contracts; to sue, and be sued; and to testify in courts of justice.'⁶⁷ Immediately, this revealed what women still lacked in 1848. In general outline this was not very different from the situation of women around 1776 as analyzed in chapter 1. Political nor economical freedom was theirs.

⁶⁶ Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage I*, 68.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 73. See also the *Declaration of Sentiments* and the resolutions that were adopted at the Seneca Falls Convention: *Ibidem*, 70-73.

The greater virtuousness ascribed to women following the American Revolution was something which recurred in the resolutions of this convention as well, in more ways than one. In two subsequent resolutions this was referred to very clearly:

Resolved, That inasmuch as man, while claiming for himself intellectual superiority, does accord to woman moral superiority, it is pre-eminently his duty to encourage her to speak and teach, as she has an opportunity, in all religious assemblies.

Resolved, That the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behaviour that is required of woman in the social state, should also be required of man, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman.⁶⁸

These resolutions spoke of the perceived responsibility in virtue, laid upon women of that era. What shone through these lines was that this moral position of women was restricting them in several ways. It might have been nice to be deemed morally superior, but it did not gain them anything, as they were not allowed to do anything constructive with it and it only made them victims of unequal and unjust judgements. The *Declaration of Sentiments* itself was a treatise centred on the confinement of woman, being oppressed by man and deprived of all her rights by him, and on top of that excluded of all means of independence.

In any case, these four women that organized the Seneca Falls Convention, as well as all the attending men and women who put their names under this declaration and the resolutions, were of the opinion, after comparing woman's situation with the universal rights as stated in the *Declaration of Independence*, that women had not had an American Revolution. In their view, the rights declared in that declaration of 1776 did not match their position in society and family. The revolutionary change for women that they hoped to achieve as a consequence of this convention and by adopting the declaration and resolutions delivered at it, unfortunately did not happen in the anticipated way. Disappointingly for the four organizing women, the publications about the convention and its resolved issues were widely ridiculed and denounced and did not find widespread assent. Many who signed the *Declaration of Sentiments* and the adopted resolutions, withdrew their signature after the negative outside reactions.⁶⁹

However, not all remained unchanged for women in this period around 1848. As a matter of fact, an important bill, that was just accepted by the state government, was discussed during the Seneca Falls Convention. By passing this bill, New York – as the first of all states – granted wives equal property rights. With this it did finally 'emancipate wives from the

⁶⁸ Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage I*, 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 73.

slavery of the old common law of England'.⁷⁰ In *History of Woman Suffrage* this is marked as a momentous moment for women. Here, a problem that still restricted women at the time of the American Revolution and that was hardly thinkable of changing back then, was solved. Unfortunately however, this applied only to the women in the state of New York.

On the area of suffrage, the woman movement still had a long way to go till 1920 when the franchise was finally granted to women in all the states of America. But from the beginning of the nineteenth century – with a culmination in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 – American women, be it in very small numbers at first, began to become more politically active in areas and in manners that were seen as unwomanly. The abolition movement provides an example of this. Women like Mott and Stanton initially stood up as abolitionist speakers and activists.⁷¹

So there were changes, but they were of a very small scale and were hardly even allowed on that small scale. Nothing revolutionary in this sense thus. Besides this, the First Woman's Rights Convention met with so much ridicule and criticism afterwards that many women got scared back, in this way immediately diminishing the revolutionary potential the organizing women of the conference were aiming at. Still, something had been gained by cumulative decades of increasing woman's activity and this first general convention for women's rights. The year 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention marked the offset of the woman suffrage movement, the so called first wave of feminism, the struggle for women's equal political voting rights.⁷² The battle for women's rights really commenced from this moment. This First Woman's Rights Convention was followed by more, so the radical message slowly spread further across the nation. With this form – a convention – the movement had reached a more organized implementation. Because of that, the movement could become an actual movement as opposed to being merely constituted by a few lone rangers.

2.2. Feminism

As concluded in the previous paragraph, the Seneca Falls Convention marked the offset of a larger women suffrage movement throughout America. When following the radical American feminist Shulamith Firestone, it could be stated that feminism – with all its waves –

⁷⁰ Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage I*, 64.

⁷¹ Anne M. Boylan, 'Women and Politics in the Era before Seneca Falls', *Journal of the Early Republic* 10:3 (1990) 363-365.

⁷² Sarah Gamble ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London/New York 2006) 20-21.

was a revolution for women. In her words it was a revolution to overthrow ‘the oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence, the class system based on sex’.⁷³

When looking at French feminism, the French Revolution is generally seen as the beginning of it as a movement.⁷⁴ Practically, the French Revolution may not have worked out for women of that era as it did for men in providing them with more rights – much the same as the American Revolution – but mentally the French Revolution had great consequences for the future of women. Olympe De Gouges wrote an influential document during this revolution, called the *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*.⁷⁵ It was written in reaction to and as a direct echo of the *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* constituted by the then newly established French National Assembly in August 1789 and is viewed upon as a key document in the offset of the women’s suffrage movement.⁷⁶

Interestingly, the American Revolution has in common with the French Revolution that its key political document was later used and appealed to by women for their cause, as we have seen in the previous section with Stanton’s *Declaration of Sentiments*. It also has in common that at the time of the publication of these declarations – both in France and in America – the beginning of the feminist movement was laid. In this way, the American Revolution could be said to have had an important influence on the beginning of the feminist movement, though it was a delayed influence in comparison to the French feminist movement. In Firestone’s opinion too, it were ‘the smouldering ideals of the American Revolution’ that eventually sparked off the Seneca Falls Convention and the feminist movement thereafter.⁷⁷ From this viewpoint then, the American Revolution could be seen to have resulted in a revolution for women.

Still however, because of the substantial distance in time between the American Revolution and the Seneca Falls Convention it might be argued that the American Revolution did not lead directly to this convention and to the beginning of feminism in America, but other factors did, even though it did contribute substantially, because its ideals played a central part in the beginning of the movement for woman suffrage. Whether feminism was a revolution for women is another statement that cannot be taken for granted, opinions are likely to differ on this point. Whether feminism can count as a revolution, is to be researched and discussed.

⁷³ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York 1975) 15.

⁷⁴ Joan Kelly, ‘Early Feminist Theory and the “Querelle des Femmes”, 1400-1789’, *Signs* 8:1 (1982) 4.

⁷⁵ Olympe de Gouges, ‘Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne’ (1791).

⁷⁶ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 192.

⁷⁷ Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 16.

What does become clear after this, is that the ideals brought in the American Revolution 'smouldered' long after it had historically taken place for white men. For women there were no real swift and radical changes, neither around 1776, nor around 1848. There were small changes and gains however, and there was a dawning and developing of ideas about women's rights, which eventually culminated in the feminist movement.

Conclusion

At the time of the American Revolution, women experienced a lot of changes. Many of these had set in earlier, for example instigated by Enlightenment ideas, but were accelerated by the revolution. Many were consequences of the revolutionary wartime that challenged society, and were of a more temporary nature. Some were direct consequences of the revolution and the new ideas and ideals it brought and seemed to give women more freedom. Education became more open to female attendance as her intellectual equality to men was acknowledged, the possibility for divorce was widened and above all her virtue became revered.

Although these changes can be termed quite radical, they did not have real radical, palpable consequences. The ranges of careers open to women remained restricted to the occupations that were deemed female. Politically and economically, women stayed dependent on fathers and husbands. The veneration of their virtuousness placed them even more firmly in their private, domestic position of mother and wife as they had been before. Along with this, they faced an increased responsibility of raising good men for the republic and leading their husbands and sons on the right, patriotic path. Seen from this angle, there was no real radical change for women, since their dependent position as a woman and tasks as wife and mother were reinforced because of the new revolutionary thought. At the time of the American Revolution, women, therefore, did not have a revolution.

The new ideals ventured as the basis for the revolution, however, did have an impact on women's lives and minds that outreached the revolutionary years. At the First Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 these ideals – as originally proclaimed in the *Declaration of Independence* – were purposely used to give proof of the unjust position of women in society and to inspire a rebellion of and for women. The contemptuous reaction of contemporaries scared most women out of rebellion, so in 1848 women neither achieved an American Revolution of their own. Still, a step had been made, a window had been opened, a new degree of organization had been established. At this convention, American feminism commenced in its first wave, the battle for woman suffrage. The feminist movement would eventually change women's lives drastically. Whether or not feminism can be seen as a revolution and whether or not the American Revolution was a direct cause of it, are however statements to be researched more deeply.

Perhaps there were other moments in American history where the smouldering ideals of the American Revolution worked through in radical, revolutionary actions or decisions.

However, at the end of this research, it can be arguably established that at two moments in history very closely connected with the American Revolution, women did not have a revolution.

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